Social Support Shorts Episode 10: Discovering Sources of Social Support

Well, hello everyone this is August again. Welcome back to another episode of Social Support Shorts. Last time, we created and discussed the Circle of Support, which is a handy tool that helps you to visualize the support that is around you. It may have helped you to understand who is closer to you in the circle and who might be a little farther away.

And that just helps you to figure out who may be more readily available to you to lean on for support and just generally what your Circle of Support looks like.

And as I mentioned, it is a living document, over time you may learn that people, professionals or organizations you placed in the outer circle are more readily available to support you. And you can move those names inwards towards the center – towards you.

Or maybe you thought someone in the middle was a strong support, and for whatever circumstance they haven't been recently, and you need to temporarily or even permanently move them towards the outer circle away from you. That's okay, too. You can add people or organizations after the fact as well, as you realize that they are available.

And that's what brings me to something I mention in the past episodes – an exercise to possibly help discover more support that may be available to you. Well, that episode is finally here.

This is a unique episode because I am going to walk you through the steps, but you will be doing the steps actively outside of the episode with one or two people in your personal life.

So, if you aren't already doing so, you may want to take notes, and as always remember you can pause or rewind the episode at any time if you need some more time.

Now, first, I want to give you a little background. I don't often mention past research directly. I might say, “oh, and the research shows” but this is a very specific type of research, and talking about this one study is important because it lays the foundation for this exercise.

Now I can't take credit for the research, and I need to acknowledge that this is the work of Koehly and their research colleagues in 2015.

So, it's been shown that sometimes, especially when caregiving duties take up a lot of your time, that caregivers may not be able to list everyone that can be included in their Circle of Support.

They might forget some people, I mean, sure you think of the obvious ones, but there may be blinders to others who have supported you in the past or have supported you in subtle ways that you may not have recognized.

And you have a lot on your plate, as I have mentioned, and you may need a fresh set of eyes, as they say.

So anyways, Koehly and colleagues, they met with caregivers and they asked one simple question: “Who gives you social support?” So, then the researchers, they wrote down the people that each caregiver listed and on average, each caregiver thought of about six people or organizations – some more, some less – but on average six.

Then the researchers went to other important people in that caregiver's life and asked the same question: Who provides each caregiver social support?

And the researchers also found that those individuals mentioned six people or organizations. Now, at face value, that doesn't sound like big growth in social support numbers, does it?

We're still at the number six, but this is the interesting thing, when the researchers put all of those names together for each caregiver, the caregivers list and the other important people in their lives lists, they found that there wasn't a lot of overlap between what the caregivers had on their list and the important others had on their list.

The average number of new supports actually grew by 10 support sources. So that means each caregiver had about 16 sources of support on average, and again that's 10 possible sources of support that the average caregiver may have missed.

Now I can't guarantee that each of you will discover ten new sources of support - isn't it worth a try? Even if a couple new people or organizations are discovered?

So here is the proposed exercise, invite a couple of people who you know well, and also know the person you provide care for pretty well over for coffee.

It might be a good idea to prime them beforehand, so they know what they're getting into. You can simply say something like: “I've been working on a list of people around me who support me, and I'd really appreciate if you could take ten minutes to come and help me out with thinking of some other names of people who you think can support me. Is that okay?”

Now, importantly, if they are receptive, ask them not to tell you any names until after everyone has done the exercise. And then, when everyone's done, compare the lists.

I can't guarantee that there will be tremendous gains, but even if you only learn of a few new supports, isn't that a win? I think so, and I really hope you do this experiment, friend. And again, I hope it really, really helps.

Now, if you have trouble finding people to join you on this experiment, also consider reaching out to organizations like the Alzheimer Society to find out about the supports that are available in your community. Perhaps you will discover some untapped resources that way.

And well, friends, it is that time again, we are nearing the end of another episode. Next Episode, we'll be talking about how best to communicate our needs to others in a way that will be well received by them and increase our chances of feeling supported.

And I am really looking forward to all of these discussions. I appreciate you spending your time with me, and thanks again for joining me on this social support journey. This is August, signing out for now.